Putting the Computer in its Proper Place: Inside the Classroom

By Luis Reis

Are EFL teachers compatible with computers? In class, why do computers seem to steal the show? Are computers teaching aids or extra weight for us to carry on our (often tired) shoulders? What have CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) classes actually accomplished so far?

This article is an account of a six-month experiment carried out at ABA (Associacao Brasil-America) Recife, where I examined the impact of having a complete multimedia 486 computer (equipped with CD-ROM) permanently available in my classroom, supplementing the VCR, cassette recorder, and overhead projector.

The CALL Lab and the One Computer Classroom

The ABA has worked with computers for years. However, our CALL experience had been limited to classes in a multi-computer laboratory. Despite the lack of structured feedback from our teachers, we all seemed to agree that our CALL classes had not evolved to the pedagogical level that we had expected. Unfortunately, instead of highly-motivating classes in which communication and learning could naturally flourish, our CALL classes had become either grammar-centered (when teachers opted to drill students with tutorial grammar software) or somewhat confusing (when teachers tried to carry on any communicative activity).

To maintain truly communicative CALL in a multi-computer language laboratory still seems to be beyond our reach. Different levels of computer skills, motivation, and even typing speeds will invariably work against coordinated productive language learning. I myself, could hardly ever go through my lesson plans satisfactorily. Since I work mostly with teens, their enthusiasm and impatience frequently got in the way of our most promising activities. In addition, the very moment our students (including adults) stepped into the CALL lab, they automatically switched to Portuguese, and it would take a great deal of time and negotiation to free them from that "Portuguese only/computer excitement-based spell."

In a classroom with only one computer, these problems are lessened considerably. Once the teacher can control the computer, s/he will be able to: (*a*) state the goal and monitor the pace of each activity, (*b*) lead the students to the most productive parts of the programs, and (*c*) save time by reducing operational problems. However, since the students will not interact directly with the computer they may feel less motivated. And for big groups, a class with only one computer may lose its effectiveness because many students may not be close enough to the computer to follow the activity.

Having one computer in the classroom is something considerably different from having occasional one-computer classes. While in our one-computer classes, there was a lot of

excitement common to any new special activity, having a computer permanently in class brought us the necessary serenity to interact with the programs fruitfully. By the time the computer was assimilated as part of our daily classroom routine, I could observe the following differences in the behavior of my students:

1. They became less excited about using a computer--which helped me keep their attention focused on subject matter.
2. Those students who were not computer-lovers gradually became less resistant to its presence, and started interacting in a friendly, comfortable way with it.
3. The use of the computer began to be valued less for its amusing/fun aspects and more for its extraordinary capability of providing important information promptly.
4. I stopped feeling that the computer would always dim my presence in class. Instead, I felt that it could greatly contribute to keeping me in the spotlight. (Teacher vanity? Of course!)
5. The availability of multimedia technology enabled me to create many interactive, communicative, and cooperative activities which could variously appear at any stage of my lesson plans (pre-warmup, warm-up, presentation, practice, and production).

Some Practical Activities with the Computer

In a classroom equipped with one computer, the teacher is naturally motivated to create new activities or to improve upon well-known classroom tasks. A high-tech look can give new life to very ordinary activities like dictations and vocabulary memory games. For example, I would like to list several easy-to-implement, computer-based communicative classroom activities, aimed at each major stage of a communicative EFL lesson plan.

Pre-warmup activity

The teacher writes some questions on the board before the students enter the classroom. The questions may focus on any general interest topic (the moon-landing, etc.) or a famous character (Martin Luther King Jr.). The computer is left on, running a Multimedia Encyclopedia CD-ROM program with which the students must be familiarized. Five or ten minutes before the class begins, the students will try to answer the questions by searching for the necessary information in the encyclopedia.

Warm-up activity

The teacher shows a short computerized video or an illustrated vita of a famous historical character. Those videos are common in almanac-like CD-ROM programs, and also in multimedia encyclopedias. After showing the video, the teacher invites the students to quiz themselves orally, in pairs, about the information they were just exposed to.

Presentation activity

Grammar . The teacher selects an interactive multimedia book, (there is a great supply of those kinds of CD-ROM programs available at software stores, especially for children) in which the target grammar point occurs. While presenting this program, the teacher encourages the students, one at time, to interact with the program.

Vocabulary . The teacher divides the class into groups. By using a vocabulary software program--a multimedia one which provides pronunciation--the teacher will click on an item in such way that the whole class will be able to listen to the new word, but only the members of one group will see its meaning on the computer screen. After the computer reads the new word three times, the groups, in turn, will mime or explain with their own words the meaning of the new word presented.

Practice

Grammar . The teacher splits the class into two teams. Each player answers one question. If the answer is wrong, one member of the other team has the chance to answer. For this activity, the teacher must use a grammar exercise program.

Vocabulary . The teacher uses the same game suggested for grammar practice with a vocabulary game program like "Hangman" or crossword puzzles, or even a multimedia dictionary. The best vocabulary game programs allow the user to enter his/her own list of words.

Production

The teacher starts a debate on any controversial topic, such as the ecological impact of building a nuclear plant compared to its possible benefits. Then, by using the computer as a resource for information, students will debate the pros and cons of nuclear energy. There are many interactive decision making programs which provide students with all the information they need to base their arguments on and, at the same time, they lead the students to draw conclusions on the pertinent issue.

Reevaluating the Role of the Computer in EFL

Give the computer important, specific roles, and it will respond effectively. Although it is far from being a magical solution to all our problems, it opened doors to many new challenges. There is still a need for more research before computers are successfully adapted to our present EFL methodologies, but I cannot think of a future in TEFL without them.

While computer labs will tend to be used more and more for self-access and remedial work, I am convinced that the use of the computer in the classroom itself will progress rapidly. Nevertheless, it cannot replace the teacher and they must be trained to use them. Investing in hardware and software is a waste of money if the institution does not also invest in training teachers in computer technology, as well.

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